

# Daphne Marlatt's "Ana Historic": Queering the Postcolonial Nation

HEATHER ZWICKER

TO READ CANADIAN literature in terms of postcolonialism invariably raises two crucial questions for many readers who tend to prefer a postmodern approach: first, what is postcolonial about it? And, second, what is Canadian about it? I understand these questions as expressing an anxiety about locating Canadian postcoloniality somewhere between the national and the international. This anxiety—well placed, because Canadian postcoloniality *is* a vexed issue—becomes particularly intense when the work under discussion is stylistically postmodern, as is Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic*. The postmodern aesthetic characteristics of the novel invoke a whole series of problematic oppositions: postmodern versus postcolonial versus Canadian versus political; Self versus Other; and, perhaps most troubling of all, the postmodern politics of queerness versus the postcolonial politics of race. Such binary oppositions are, of course, insoluble—indeed, to address them directly is to reinforce their hegemony. They can be undone obliquely, however, by addressing three apparently marginal concerns evoked by all of them: nation, sexuality, and race. Although often ignored in the criticism of *Ana Historic*, these three concepts are central to the text. As I read it, the novel superimposes the sexually queer over the racially Other so as to reorient the sense of nation and thereby destabilize the postmodern/postcolonial dichotomy.

Most theories of the nation differentiate the material entity of "nation-state" from the conceptual entity of "nation."<sup>1</sup> Against the nation as objective, impersonal, historical entity stands the subjective experience of nationality, whether patriotic or dissident. The nation is always at once official and unofficial

discourse, both ideological apparatus and subjective descriptor. The most persuasive scholarship on the nation discusses the mediation between the former and the latter, the translation of nation as objective historical and material entity into nation as axis of subjectivity.

Best known in this field is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. After identifying "nation-ness" as "the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (3), Anderson defines the nation, in what has become a well-known tag, as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). Anderson is very specific as to what he means by "imagined" (no one can know everyone in a given nation), "limited" (no nation is coterminous with humankind), "sovereign" (the dream of freedom has national contours) and "community" ("deep, horizontal comradeship" [6]), but the phrase "imagined community" is even more productive when used less denotatively. In calling the nation "imagined," Anderson draws attention to the possibilities and limitations of citizenship as people represent it to themselves—the nation as hegemonic in Gramsci's sense of the term, a dominant structure built on consent.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach makes possible an understanding of the nation from above and from below, simultaneously. The "deep, horizontal comradeship" on which national affiliation rests is produced, Anderson goes on to argue, by materialized discourses like the newspaper, the census, and the museum.

More provocatively (if sketchily), Anderson argues that novels similarly buttress the nation.<sup>3</sup> Elements of any particular narrative become meaningful only with regard to the "socoscape" in which they are set; the reader must make sense of the "complex gloss upon the word 'meanwhile'" that the novel sets in motion (32). To put this another way, characters inhabit a world that is only partially represented in, but fully assumed by, the novel. References within the text to other people, places, and events rely on the reader's supplying the appropriate context, often a national one.

The problem Anderson poses for us is how the nation might be imagined from the perspective of those who do not feel a "deep,

horizontal comradeship" with its idealized, official form—those alienated from it because they inhabit a non-dominant sexuality, class, gender, or race. As Partha Chatterjee trenchantly asks of Anderson, "Whose Imagined Community?" (the title of Chapter One in *The Nation and Its Fragments*). And yet, provocative as his question might be, ultimately it is the wrong one to ask, for it renders community monolithic, assuming that a nation can be possessed by a single, identifiable group or cohort. Such a conception of nation—though politically useful for explaining ongoing social inequities—is intellectually suspect. Much more compelling is a view of nation that takes both dissent and patriotism into account, recognizing the coexistence of a sense of alienation with the desire to be part of *some* community, which would always have to measure itself to some degree against the nation.

Such ambivalence is central to Homi Bhabha's idea of the nation, and he gives us the tools to link this nation more solidly to the novel. In "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," he argues that the nation as a narrative strategy continually mediates between two times: the pedagogical history which makes citizens objects of the nation, and the performative practice of the everyday, whereby citizens themselves constantly reconstruct nationhood. As he puts it,

the people are the historical "objects" of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event [what Bhabha calls the pedagogical]; the people are also the "subjects" of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principle of the people as that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process [what Bhabha calls the performative]. (297)

The nation as pedagogy tells its objects a single, coherent, stable narrative of its history and continuity. The performance of nation, on the other hand, is necessarily rife with contradictions and warring allegiances because subjectivity is thicker than any single coherent narrative can capture. The performance of national subjectivity collaborates with and contradicts the national pedagogy at multiple points, putting patriotism and dissidence

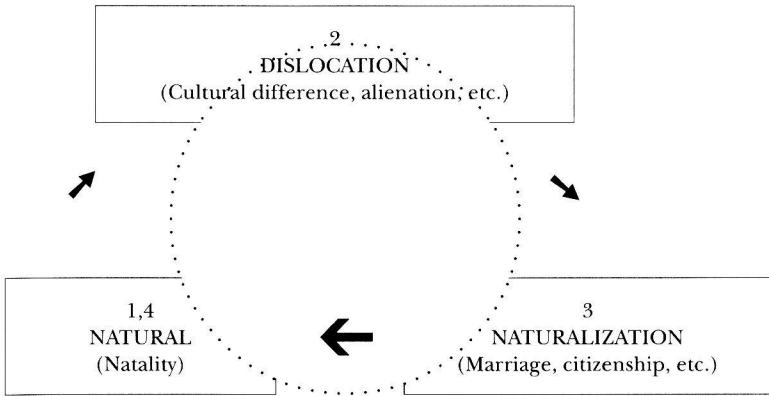
into action at once. The performative moment, in other words, constantly interrupts pedagogy's interpellative intent so as to derail it momentarily. The effect of these continual interruptions is to bar the nation from its "eternal self-generation" (299).

No longer a coherent pedagogy, Bhabha argues, the nation becomes instead a liminal form that exists where the pedagogical construct meets the performative citizen—at the moment of interpellation. Its culture is "at once opened up and held together" by the repetitive insertion of performative individuals and communities into the pedagogical; their incorporation constantly transforms it, just as they enact the national subjectivity that interpellates them (305). This is the moment of engaging in the struggles that inhere in national spaces.

The contentiousness of performative subjectivities in the midst of a coercive national pedagogy means that national identity will not be static or synchronous or teleological but, rather, dynamic and plural. Where there was one story, suddenly there are several. Such narrative heterogeneity—which Bhabha describes as "disseminatory"—is not free play, but contest. Its effect is to destabilize a hegemonic national narrative's telos, to diversify its assimilative drive, to lay bare its processes of naturalization. As a result of this deconstruction of dominance, what was marginal can become central. In his emphasis on the continual reconstruction of national subjectivity and, thereby, the destabilization of received historical narrative, Bhabha makes the nation neither an object nor even really a structure, but a continually articulated hegemonic formation that allows for heterogeneity and dissension.

The movement Bhabha traces in the ambivalence of the nation is precisely the movement inherent in *Ana Historic*. The communities the text imagines take their structure from the nation but differentiate themselves significantly from the nation's constantly recuperative trajectory. In recapitulating the model of nation against which it works, the novel makes evident that to be most useful, theories of nation have to be able to conceive of the abstract entity "nation" as well as the material reality of the nation-state. Extended narratives that unfold in particular socioscapes over time, novels serve as an important

means by which the concrete experience of national subjectivity is articulated in narrative form. And while neither nation nor nation-state is monolithic, dissident nationalisms nonetheless get articulated over and against the dominant pedagogy of the official nation. The dominant pedagogy of the ideal nation is that of assimilation; to perpetuate itself, the nation accommodates the movement of people through space and time by a constant cycle toward naturalization. This movement can be illustrated by the following diagram:



The first point on the diagram is natality, the social location which assumes a one-to-one equivalence of subjectivity with nationality. Almost inevitably, this originary position is interrupted by some form of dislocation; in material terms, alienating experiences like exile, emigration, or diaspora; in discursive terms, "differences" of class, sexuality, race, or gender. These dislocations often precipitate dissent, which the nation-state then attempts to recuperate through such institutions as marriage, citizenship, or other forms of socioeconomic enfranchisement. The hegemonic pull of the assimilative nation-state relies on naturalization, its promise being that the second generation, born unproblematically into the nation, can once again occupy the originary position of the "natal/natural." By moving in such a cycle, the nation perpetually reproduces itself.

In literary terms, the name for such a recuperative cycle is comedy. If the national narrative of assimilation describes cycli-

cal motion within linear time, so too does the comic plot—as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, or virtually any Jane Austen novel.<sup>4</sup> The telos of comedy is usually marriage and sometimes childbirth, which heterosexual libidinal union is meant to soothe sociopolitical discord and reclaim deviance. In this way, the emplotment of national comedy carefully controls dissent. No matter how much strife, no matter what the cultural difference, the ideal nation's comic plot—its pedagogy, to use Bhabha's term—insists on a predictable happy ending.

Furthermore, the closed cycle of the ideal nation does not admit an outside to itself. And herein lies the real significance of Bhabha's imbrication of performance with pedagogy: if counter-hegemonic narratives are necessarily imbricated in the dominant narrative of national hegemony, dissident national narratives cannot stand outside the structure they critique. Narratives that would differentiate themselves from the ideal nation's continuist cycle must use the same figures to different ends, relying on dissemination and heterogeneity rather than simply corrective histories.

Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988) parodically reproduces the comic plot of marriage and childbirth by rendering both lesbian. The effect is to mimic the continuist narrative of the nation in a way that lays bare its desire to harness the labour of women to its self-generation. In the visual terms of the diagram I traced above, Marlatt's novel writes its counter-narrative of the nation as a palimpsest over the normative, heterosexual model. Whereas the discourse of the ideal nation would have the nation reproduce itself by assimilating and obliterating cultural or sexual difference, accommodating the movement of people through space and time by a constant pull toward naturalization formalized by institutions like marriage or second-generation citizenship, Marlatt's female characters, who marry (sort of) and reproduce (but not conventionally), resist the compulsory heterosexism of the comic nation from within.

Marlatt symbolizes Canada's identity as a nation in three characters, all women and all, in their own ways, immigrants, who are invoked through the consciousness of the protagonist, Annie. While the narration of the novel is complex, its plot is fairly

simple. In the course of doing historical research in the Vancouver City Archives for her professor husband, Richard, Annie discovers two very short references to a Mrs. Richards, who arrives in Vancouver to teach school in 1873—significantly, a mere six years after the British North America Act which founds Canada as such. Obsessed by the way this official history erases Mrs. Richards's life, Annie begins writing a novel that imagines the life Ana Richards (Annie supplies a first name for her) might have had. This novel becomes *Ana Historic's* embedded narrative. Annie's writing of this novel continually interrupts itself with reminiscences of her mother, Ina, now dead, and metacritical reflections on the process of writing itself. Underneath all of this reflective activity, in the narrative present, Annie moves slowly but steadily away from her relationship with her husband, toward a sexual relationship with a woman named Zoe.

The story of Annie's relationship with Zoe charts its course against the double-faced annihilative telos prescribed for women by patriarchal, national history: either marriage (Ana's fate) or death (Ina's end). Confronted with these two equally undesirable options, Annie must find a way to write her fate differently. Her imaginative alternative is a lesbian relationship with Zoe. Such a plot remains comic, but the substitution of lesbian for straight sexuality makes it a parodic rewriting of the continuist national narrative. It uncannily mimics both marriage (it is still a sexual relationship) and death (its sexuality is not generative).<sup>5</sup> The proximity of this alternative imagination to conventional heterosexual, nationalistic discourse is important. Because there is no uncontaminated space outside the nation, resistance to it must come from within. The Otherness of Marlatt's plot is thoroughly imbricated in the fabric of national hegemony, at once disciplinary and disseminatory. It destabilizes in precisely the manner that Bhabha claims racial Otherness does, producing "a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (*The Location of Culture* 86).

The slippage here between sexual and racial Otherness is telling, and yet very few critics that I know of have seriously examined Marlatt's use of race in her fiction (see Grise; Harasym; and Whitlock for exceptions to this). The silence of

other critics on the topic is troubling, not least because race, in conjunction with sexuality, is central to Marlatt's representation of the dynamics of nation-formation in a settler colony. On one occasion, the colonial heroine Ana is walking in the woods, looking for a place to write, when two Siwash men approach from behind. Ana panics.

What should she say? She turned and continued walking, felt them gaining on her. Turned again. The tall one swayed a little. Were they drunk? "They go crazy when they drink," she heard Mrs. Patterson say, "we can't stop the shiphands from trading them liquor." They did not look drunk. Advanced rather, with a steady tread, a sombre determination. Perhaps they were furious and meant to do her harm. She should say Good day, something civil, but she froze on the path as they approached, sick with the stories she had heard: Stackeye axing Perry in his sleep, Mrs. Sullivan menaced with a knife. It was the sickness of fear and they knew it as they crowded past her as if she were a bush, a fern shaking in their way. (41-42)

Ana finds herself caught in the anxiety of colonial discourse, where the fixity of the racist stereotype comes up against its refutation: Indians are always drunk, but these Indians do not look drunk. As Bhabha argues in "The Other Question" (*The Location of Culture*), the stereotype as phobia is never far from the stereotype as fetish. Indeed, the scene fits uncomfortably well with other interactions Ana has with men, scopical scenes like this one which figure Ana as sexual prey. This scene, the colonial woman face-to-face with the figures that refute the legitimacy of British colonialism, suggests a fear of contamination by the pre-national or precolonial. Gendered *and* raced, the tension enacts, in other words, the complicated desire for and fear of miscegenation that underlies the colonial nation.

Race is taken up in the narrative present and displaced—not to dismiss it but to undercut, obliquely, the binary opposition of Self/Other on which it rests. Racial difference modulates into sexual difference in the lovemaking scene between Annie and Zoe that closes the novel:

she asks me to present myself, to take the leap, as the blood rushes into my face and can speak: you. i want you. *and* me. together.  
she isn't surprised. it isn't even Frankenstein but a nameless part i know. terror has to do with the trembling that takes you out of



yourself. we go up the stairs, we enter a room that is alive with the smell of her. bleeding and soft. her on my tongue. she trembles violently on my lips. (152)

The terror, trembling, and sexuality of the scene recalls the meeting between Ana and the Siwash men. But whereas the threat of racial miscegenation is somehow overdetermined in the narrative of the nation, rewriting miscegenation as desire between two women defamiliarizes and subverts it. Furthermore, while the discourse of miscegenation rigidifies categories of Self and Other, lesbian desire, predicated on the presupposition of sameness (two women), works against such discrete categories. The Other to the protagonist Self of *Ana Historic* is not consolidated, but doubled and split between the Siwash men and Zoe; at the same time, Annie's narrative masks, Ana and Ina, fracture her subjectivity across time.

The woman-centred vision of *Ana Historic* undercuts the founding binarisms of the nation, even as it parodically reproduces its figures. If the relationship between Annie and Zoe answers the nation's call to couple, the birth scene in the embedded narrative—quite self-consciously and metaphorically presented as the birth of a nation—answers the nation's call to reproduce. Such reproduction can be counter-hegemonic because giving birth, the zenith of comedic heterosexuality, is in Marlatt's account specifically lesbian. For Marlatt, birthing is, first of all, a speech act whereby women communicate with each other through their bodies. The birth scene in *Ana Historic* takes its terms directly from Marlatt's 1984 essay "musing with mother-tongue," a piece which argues for reconstituting language along woman-centred lines: "putting the living body of language together means putting the world together, the world we live in: an act of composition, an act of birthing, us, uttered and outered there in it" (49). *Ana Historic* picks up on the image of life-giving language: the baby born is "a massive syllable of slippery flesh" (126) which "slide[s] out the open mouth" of the mother, Susan, into "the given" (127). But the birthing experience, in all its collaborative labour, is also sexualized, with hands on and in the birthing woman's body, urging "out and in. out *and* in" (125)—it is so sexualized, in fact, that when the baby turns out to be a

boy, Ana finds herself “taken aback by the babe’s equipment” (126). Suddenly it is the male body which has become startling, not only for its difference from the female body which has given it birth, but because its emergence marks once again the rigidification of Self and Other. Whereas the woman giving birth—and, by Marlatt’s sexualization of birthing, potentially every woman—is “neither one nor two,” to borrow Irigaray’s formulation in *This Sex Which is Not One*, the male child signifies the singularity and selfhood on which patriarchal history depends.

Marlatt evidently uses this scene to show two things at once: first, how the birth of a nation depends on singular subjects, and second, how the act of giving birth, literally and figuratively, can be used to subvert that expectation. Marlatt glosses this literal and figurative process of giving birth as a kind of “uttering/outring” whereby women speak with each other through their bodies. I would extend her term to cover the long process of “outing” which structures *Ana Historic* as a lesbian coming-out novel (“musing” 49). In charting Annie’s movement from her marriage with Richard to a sexual relationship with Zoe, the narrative participates in a feminist metaphor of awakening: Annie is literally asleep when the story opens, and her first, self-referential question as she awakens is “Who’s There?” (9). The answer, however, is not self-evident; in fact, it takes the entire novel to answer it—and then only provisionally. By playing with the trope of coming out of the closet, Annie constructs a sexual subjectivity that then goes on to undercut, surprisingly, the very Self/Other dichotomy on which an alternative sexual identity would seem to rest.

The closet Annie eventually comes out of is literalized as a “wardrobe/wordrobe” (9) that is “big enough to hide Frankenstein” (10). It is in fact a monster that Annie expects to face with her castrating knife in the opening pages of the novel; the wardrobe, however, turns out to be empty. The empty closet—initially a puzzling trope—stages Marlatt’s complicated vision. Whereas conventions of the coming-out narrative posit a stable closet out of which emerges a homosexual Self, Marlatt turns the closet inside out around homophobic fear. The figure of Frankenstein the monster is crucial here—but inverted.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of using Frankenstein in the most transparent sense as outlaw and inassimilable Other, in order to revalorize conventional representations of lesbianism as monstrosity, Marlatt shows the ways in which homophobia at once creates and exceeds the carceral dimensions of the closet as a trope.<sup>7</sup>

Instead of Frankenstein, what Annie confronts when she flings open the dark wardrobe door is the fear that she will "end up as girls were meant to be" (12). The monster is not, then, a presence in the closet, but a free-floating signifier for the terror that keeps women inside the bounds of propriety—in other words, homophobia, a terror which can never be fixed in one location because it is socially omnipresent. Homophobia in *Ana Historic* takes the form of compulsory heterosexuality, and it is represented by the alternatives of marriage and death meted out to Ana and Ina, respectively. In order to avoid these two textual teleologies, Annie has to confront and destroy her fear of the narrative possibilities that might lie outside them (12). She does this by writing her way out of the closet—the closet is, after all, not just a "wardrobe" but also a "wordrobe." Language and narrative might imprison their subjects in some narratives, but they also make possible the imagining of alternatives.

For Marlatt, these alternatives have to gauge themselves not only against traditional narratives—comedy and tragedy, most obviously—but also against radical orthodoxies like that of the conventional coming-out narrative, which is based on a troubling predisposition to tautology.<sup>8</sup> Biddy Martin describes the quandary very clearly:

Many . . . coming-out stories are tautological insofar as they describe a process of coming to know something that has always been true, a truth to which the author has returned. They also describe a linear progression from a past shrouded in confusion or lies to a present or future that represents a liberation from the past. Coming out is conceived, then, as both a return to one's true self and desire and a movement beyond distortion and constraint, grounding identity and political unity in moral right and truth. (89)

The conventional coming-out narrative, in other words, comes with a generic stipulation to have a singular sexuality and unproblematic self-knowledge.

Marlatt's use of Frankenstein serves, again, as a brilliant counter to this tendency. A literally constructed human—a queer subject?—the monster points out the limitations of concepts like “liberation from the past” and a “true self” for the homosexual as well as for the heterosexual subject. It is against precisely such limitations that Marlatt imagines lesbian subjectivity. Never a singular subject, and never entirely free from race or nation, the lesbian subject is, like Frankenstein, an unnatural composite of human beings which always exceeds the confines of its narrative.

The very last passage in the novel demonstrates Marlatt's vision of fluid lesbian subjectivity by utterly disorienting first, second, and third persons:

we give place, giving words, giving birth, to each other—she and me. you. hot skin writing skin. fluid edge, wick, wick. she draws me out. you she breathes, is where we meet. (153)

The undifferentiated “we” that would fix “lesbian” as a relationship of identity must here “give place” to a distinct “she and me,” which cannot solidify into a Self and Other because it instantly becomes an ambiguously signifying “you.” This shift is the means of “giving words” or writing. But writing means nothing without its reader, one of several referents of the novel's second person. The figure of two women making love becomes the figure for the reciprocal relationship between novel and reader. As a result, the novel's ending serves as the beginning of a new narrative that is written in the contract between text and reader. Like Frankenstein and his monster at the end of Shelley's novel, the lesbian relationship outruns the end of Marlatt's text, inviting the reader to pursue the lesbian heroines.<sup>9</sup>

Marlatt's use of *Frankenstein*, the nineteenth-century novel, has less obvious implications, too.<sup>10</sup> In its problematization of human subjectivity and narrative form, Shelley's text anticipates the dimensions of the historical shift from modernity to postmodernity, colonialism to postcolonialism. The nation is a key player in this shift from Cartesian certainties to contemporary indeterminacies, as Marlatt's use of female characters to symbolize the nation makes clear. As I claimed at the beginning of this paper, Ana and Annie stand for two historical moments in Canada's national subjectivity. Whereas Ana, in her valorization of Roman-

tic sensibilities, articulates the utopic hopes for the new nation, Annie's multiply fractured subjectivity voices the anxious uncertainty of Canada's postcolonial status. In other words, the rubble of the nineteenth-century narrative has become the twentieth-century pastiche, and it is the nation as a figure for this transformation that finally joins *Ana Historic's* lesbian feminism to its postcoloniality.

*Ana Historic* ends with a sexual encounter between Annie and Zoe, and this could be read in a sense as a resolution. But it is a resolution that marks the disseminatory openness, rather than the closure, of the text. The novel's insistence on lesbian sexuality as a crucial determinant of subjectivity foils the closed narrative of the comic nation. *Ana Historic* superimposes the sexually queer over the racially marginalized, and the lesbian relationship over the national narrative of heterosexual reproduction. The effect is an uncanny palimpsest which blurs the distinction between hegemonic Self and Other, and explicitly works against national narratives of destiny. The novel's raggedness defies resolution; this constitutes both its subtlety and its political vision. Any reading that presents itself as definitive risks participating in the very hegemony Daphne Marlatt is so eager to undercut. As she notes about "the illusion of narrative," it "tells us where we're going, destination, destiny—actually, in our lives, it only tells us that we're going, on the move—" ("Research Notes").

## NOTES

- 1 See Bhabha "DissemiNation"; Gellner; Hobsbawm and Ranger; Smith.
- 2 Perhaps the most succinct definition of hegemony Gramsci provides is "government with the consent of the governed" (*Prison Notebooks* 259). But see also 210-17 and 257-66 for a fuller discussion of this complex idea.
- 3 For an expansion on Anderson's insight, see Brennan, who argues that because it contains a "jumble of languages and styles" within clearly defined borders, the novel is "a composite but clearly bordered work of art that was crucial in defining the nation as an 'imagined community'" (49).
- 4 Much postcolonial theory has critiqued and rewritten *The Tempest*. If *The Tempest* is the play of colonization, might not *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its plot focused on righting marital confusions, be the play of nationalism?
- 5 Of course, heterosexuality is not necessarily generative, either, but that is its discursive valence in the traditional comic genre.

- <sup>6</sup> The term "Frankenstein" in *Ana Historic* usually refers to Frankenstein's monster, but it does slip occasionally between monster and doctor—and between Mary Shelley's novel and the film. I will follow Marlatt's most common usage. For an explicit discussion of novel versus film, see the conversation between Annie and Ina on 141-42.
- <sup>7</sup> On lesbianism and monstrosity, see Harris, who attempts (in a deliberately outrageous and largely unconvincing argument) to reclaim monstrosity as an enabling fiction by way of reclaiming *Jaws* as a lesbian text. Also see Stimpson, who argues that "Because the violent yoking of homosexuality and deviancy has been so pervasive in the modern period, little or no writing about it can ignore that conjunction" (364).
- <sup>8</sup> In an interview with George Bowering, Marlatt associates marriage and death with comedy and tragedy, respectively, and explicitly differentiates her novel from both narratives. See Bowering 105.
- <sup>9</sup> Spivak reads at the end of Shelley's *Frankenstein* a movement into "existential temporality" ("Three Women's Texts" 278). It is provocative to think of *Ana Historic* along these lines. Also like Shelley's text, *Ana Historic*'s indefinite ending means that "the monster can step 'beyond the text' and be 'lost in darkness'" ("Three Women's Texts" 278).
- <sup>10</sup> For a different and interesting discussion of the intertextuality between *Frankenstein* and *Ana Historic*, see Scheel.

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